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By Congressman Lee Hamilton

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Recently, I was among a small group of Congressmen who were briefed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on subversion in Latin America.

If the project conjures up images of a James Bond type "filling us in" at some dimly-lighted hideaway, let me quickly dispel those thoughts.

We were picked up in a car on Capitol Hill and driven eight miles to the agency's Langley Falls (Va.) headquarters. The drive, out George Washington Parkway, affords one of the best views of the panorama of the historic Potomac River and the quiet, lush Virginia Hill country to be found in the area.

The driver turned off the busy parkway at an unmarked exit for the mile-long drive to the CIA headquarters building. Other government buildings along the parkway are announced by turn-off signs and driving directions. The only clue to the CIA turn-off is a Bureau of Public Roads marker.

The headquarters, an eight-story, U shaped structure surrounded by a high, chain-link fence, came into view shortly after the turn-off. At the gate, a uniformed guard carefully checked the driver's identification badge, then asked us to state our business and to identify ourselves.

Only after the guard had verified our appointment and identity did he allow us to pass. We were driven to the main entrance of the building.

In the light and airy main lobby we were "checked out" once more by a guard and our escort met us and stayed with us every step of the way. As we waited, I noted the CIA seal and a number of American flags in the lobby. On one wall of the spacious, marbled room was inscribed the Biblical adage: "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."

The escort led us to a special elevator to the director's office. We stopped at the seventh floor, the operations center of the huge building. Here, we were led down a carpeted corridor, past doors labeled "Director" and "Deputy Director" to a spacious conference room. A massive table, surrounded by 20 or so high-backed leather chairs, dominated the room. A pad and two pencils were at each setting.

As coffee was served, I noted a number of maps on the walls, each dealing with some aspect of this country's security operations. Projectors and screens also were in this room.

CIA Director Richard M. Helms, 53, a tall, slender graying man, conservatively dressed, entered and greeted each of us individually. We were seated and he announced the agenda, introducing some of the top intelligence people who were to brief us. We were invited to question them at length. Mr. Helms then excused himself.

The agents, who looked and spoke more like college professors, began an informal but astoundingly intricate briefing on a number of Latin American countries and their present-day political and economic status. They spoke knowingly of political leaders in these countries--even down to the results of their latest physical examinations.

It soon became apparent that these men were genuine experts who pored over countless reports, news stories, speeches and statistics to acquire the expertise with which they spoke. Their presentations lasted for about an hour and they then fielded our questions with ease and competence for another hour.

At the conclusion of the briefing we were once more escorted back to the main lobby. I was told that no visitor goes unescorted through the building.

The car was waiting at the front entrance and we began the drive back to the Capitol. We were quieter, perhaps a little overwhelmed by the facts and figures with which we had been bombarded.

From time to time we hear harsh criticism of the CIA. Without passing judgment on that--it is reassuring to see the competence and skill of the CIA experts.

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